

Ochsner Health Demonstrates Flexibility and Transparency on the Path to Improve Physician Well-Being

Spotlight: Ochsner Health and the Joy in Medicine™ Health System Recognition Program

When Nigel Girgrah, MD, PhD, chief wellness officer at Ochsner Health, looks back at “the moment where it all began,” he recalls conducting the Maslach Burnout Inventory and over six months of focus groups in 2017 to understand the burnout experiences among Ochsner Health staff.

Ochsner Health is a not-for-profit integrated healthcare system with more than 34,000 employees. Its hospitals, health, and urgent care centers are located across Louisiana, Mississippi, and the Gulf South.

This initial survey and series of focus groups revealed that well-being efforts for staff required more attention. However, Dr. Girgrah and dyad partner, Melissa M. Love, MA, PHR, vice president of professional staff services and human resources, were uncertain how to develop a viable well-being strategy to propose to the executive team. The team turned to the American Medical Association (AMA) for guidance on enhancing organizational culture, building a strategy and developing a commitment to improving well-being.

In 2018, Ashton Sloan, assistant vice president of the Ochsner Office of Professional Well-Being, joined the team. This dedicated team of three became the

engine that powered Ochsner Health’s strategic efforts to build a culture of wellness. By 2019, the team had set its sights on establishing a comprehensive, data-informed well-being strategy.

“

“The Joy in Medicine program helps you put in concrete terms something that otherwise is very abstract.”

– MELISSA M. LOVE, MA, PHR

”

A foundational strategy would be crucial for long-term success. Using organizational assessments to understand current needs and build a long-term strategy, Ochsner Health developed four strategic pillars around: 1. team-based care, 2. practice automation and innovation, 3. personal and team resilience and 4. team communication. Dr. Girgrah says, “It’s easy to come up with a hundred and seven terrific ideas. But without a strategy I think you run the risk of getting unfocused. You have to be thoughtful and strategic.” As a next step, working groups were created for each of the strategic pillars, and the teams defined primary and

secondary measures of success. Additionally, Ochsner Health began to work closely with the AMA to deploy annual burnout assessments to track improvements and identify continued challenges. It has been four years since their initial assessment with the AMA and they continue to use the data to inform program changes, identify operational challenges, and illuminate areas of the organization that may require additional support.

“

“Obviously, you want engagement to improve, but that’s a cultural transformation - something that’s probably going to occur over years. In order to get there, you have to identify secondary metrics, such as things like pajama time [or time spent in electronic health records after work hours].”

– NIGEL GIRGRAH, MD, PHD

”

Melissa Love recalls a particularly successful initiative to address well-being: a personal leadership development program where participants spend three days diving into leaders’ communication skills, ability to lean into difficult conversations, and decision-making patterns. The immediate lessons and the investment in leaders’ skills created a dramatic positive shift. According to Ashton Sloan, *“The participants could not believe that a health system was really focused on them in that way... that anybody would invest in them like that, not just to look at your productivity, but ask ‘how are you doing as a person?’”* Melissa Love confirms that feedback from the physician leaders has been inspiring: *“They say, ‘This is definitely what I needed to be a better leader and to help with some of the coping needs the teams have. It takes a different level of energy than just traditional leadership.’”*

At the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, a series of challenges forced Ochsner Health to reassess their current strategy. With cases surging, particularly in Louisiana, the team quickly realized the need for flexibility and transparency. Their focus shifted from the long-term strategic plan to the basic needs of all Ochsner Health staff. They developed decompression zones (quiet areas where staff could catch their breath and decompress), guided meditations offered by the

Ochsner Therapy and Wellness teammates, and a hotline for staff who needed immediate emotional support. Dr. Girgrah recalls, *“I sent an open letter to all our 30,000 employees, and it was entitled ‘How are you really?’ I talked a little bit about my own struggles and the issue of the stigma of mental health in our profession. The response to that communication was overwhelming. I think at the time it was the most opened email in the history of [the organization’s] emails. Certainly, it started a conversation. I think it really allowed people to feel more comfortable opening up about themselves. I would hope that people who were less comfortable about reaching out for help became a little more comfortable after that communication.”*

While well-being priorities have spanned leadership, flexibility, transparency, and crisis coping, the presence and steadiness of the Ochsner Office of Professional Well-Being has remained resolute. Well-being work is never complete. It is a constant that demands time, attention, and active engagement. Dr. Girgrah confirms, *“Well-being is something that can permeate the organization to become a culture. And a culture of well-being is not antithetical to other things that we want to do as an organization. A culture of well-being is completely aligned with a culture of patient experience, a culture around quality and safety, a culture around compassion.”*



NIGEL GIRGRAH,
MD, PHD



MELISSA LOVE,
MA, PHR



ASHTON SLOAN